

There's nothing quite like Labor Day weekend, summer's last three-day hurrah, for gazing out into the open sanctuary and reflecting upon *the large crowds traveling with [Jesus]*. He must be out of town, since the people traveling with him at Resurrection are absent in droves. You might not think it from looking around today, but there is a pretty large crowd of people journeying with Jesus here at Resurrection.

There are plenty of people who are members you would never recognize, because worship is not a priority for them.

There are a surprising number of non-members who consider this their church.

Many come here to have their children baptized, then don't come back, much to the sadness or irritation of some who come every week--even Labor Day weekend--and who struggle to fight the temptation of thinking that other people should be more like them.

Perhaps the crowds stay away because they heard the truth.

Perhaps it is because we traced the sign of the cross on their child's forehead, and they were paying attention enough to realize they wanted no part of it.

Traveling with Jesus is a whole lot safer than following him.

It is a lot more prudent and practical to be fans and Facebook™ friends than disciples. Jesus' demands are a lot more extreme than those of the other gods ... or at least he's a lot more bluntly honest about them up front.

He specifically names two of the idols that we cherish most: family and possessions.

He invites us to hate our family and to give up all of the things we have.

Biblical scholars offer different interpretations of what he means by *hate*, and they remind us that family obligations were different and much more binding and burdensome in Jesus' culture, but I still can't help but think of the words of Mark Twain:

*Most people are bothered by those passages of Scripture they do not understand, but the passages that bother me are those I do understand.*

Like the cross on Jesus' back and on the baby's forehead, the words are hauntingly clear.

"To be my disciple means to reject family and to reject possessions," Jesus says.

If you're going to be a disciple, then I'm more important than anything else in your life.

Family will hold you back and stuff will weigh you down.

The things in which you place your time and your trust will let you down; now pick up your death and follow me.

Really, are you sure you want to sign up for *this*?

Most of us are reluctant to commit an hour in the middle of a three day weekend.

These harsh and hauntingly clear words of Jesus come from the lips of a man who is hauntingly clear about his own calling.

He is on his way to the cross and he knows it.

He is marching to a gruesome death he knows it is necessary for him to die.

God for whatever reason has called him to give it all away and he has answered yes.

God set before him life and prosperity, death and adversity and asked him to choose the latter, and because it was God who asked it, Jesus did.

Now he looks out at the crowds, the ancient Palestine paparazzi, and pulls no punches.

To follow Jesus as a disciple comes with a steep price tag, and he's too truthful to hide the fees.

His calling is to accomplish the impossible.

His calling is to build a church without enough disciples to complete it.

His calling is to wage a battle overmatched.

His calling is to be ridiculed and to lose.

His calling is to give up everything, from family to possessions to dignity to breath, on the cross.

His calling is to lose absolutely everything for those who are willing to offer anywhere from nothing to not nearly enough.

His calling is to die for the restoration of the world, for the healing of the nations, and for the life of those same crowds who don't love or trust him enough to be his disciples.

His calling is to show us, in his broken body, who God is and what God is all about.

God is the soldier who goes to war for the citizen who takes safety and freedom for granted and may or may not take the time just to say thank you.

God is the laborer who goes to work every day and performs with pride and excellence for the company that cares about profits, not people.

God is the architect who does not have enough builders to complete the tower but endures the shame and the mockery of religion's critics because the impossible plans are so beautiful.

God is the king who sends the only prince into battle knowing full well he's going to die out there because the cause is so important.

God is the disciple who follows us even into our own skin and society and struggle to learn what it is that we are all about, and then sticks with us even until we murder him.

God is the savior who leaves behind Father in heaven, the perfect family and a universe full of possessions and possibilities, to die abandoned and mocked and naked on the cross for fickle crowds and feckless critics.

It is this God, foolish and faithful, who would leave ninety-nine sheep to search for one who is lost, who would spend a fortune on a party to celebrate a lost coin found, who would suspend the workings of heaven to revel with joy over the return of one sinner.

That's what Jesus will say next week.

And he will say it to the dour-faced faithful, the religious leaders who have committed so much to God's cause and who resent his cavorting with tax collectors and sinners and people you would never see in church on Labor Day weekend.

He will say it in earshot of his disciples after the crowds have gone away, the crowds who count the cost and audit the audacious intentions of God and realize it is smarter to walk away.

He will say it because it is their calling to join him in chasing those crowds and loving them, to welcome them, to celebrate them, not because they deserve it, but because of who God is.

In the coming weeks there will be more people in church.

They will be back from their idle summer and their summer idols.

They will be here to baptize babies and check out what Jesus is all about.

They are so unspeakably precious that Jesus gave up everything for them.

God will be crazy excited to see them here.

Our calling as disciples is to give up our judgments and resentments and illusions of righteousness, to give up our own precious idolatries, and to welcome them with joy.

At which point God will have occasion also to celebrate us.